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SUBJECT: Sant'Egidio Inter-Religious Conference Calls for Firmness Against Terror and Dialogue Among Religions

REF: A) 03 Vatican 4289; B) Vatican 3308

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Summary  
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1. (U) The Sant'Egidio Community brought together over 7,000 religious and political leaders September 5-7 in Milan to promote inter-religious dialogue and understanding as a means to combat terrorism and build peace. The shadow of the Beslan massacre hung over the annual gathering, reinforcing the Pope's call to conference participants to "withstand the logic of violence, revenge, and hatred, and persevere in dialogue." Recognizing the religious roots of terrorism and many international conflicts, religious leaders addressed their critical role in overcoming the bitterness and misunderstanding that gives rise to terror and war. Conference participants repeatedly and strongly condemned violence in the name of religion, concluding that those who resort to violence "curse the cause for which they fight." Significantly, recalling September 11, the Pope's message to the conference called for "firmness and resoluteness" in the face of terror. The wide-ranging meeting also covered Iraq, the Israel-Palestinian Conflict, HIV/AIDS, and freedom of religion for Catholics in Russia. Ambassador Nicholson and S/GAC Chief Medical Officer Mark Dybul both spoke and outlined U.S. efforts to combat HIV/AIDS and promote development in the developing world, emphasizing U.S. support for the efforts of faith-based organizations such as Sant'Egidio. End Summary.

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Promoting Dialogue in the Face of Terror  
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2. (U) The Sant'Egidio Community's annual inter-faith conference brought together over 7,000 representatives of major world religions, governments, and NGOs to explore ways that religious leaders can forge inter-religious understanding and combat religiously rooted terrorism and violence. Speakers, including the Pope (with a written message), EU President Romano Prodi, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, and Israeli Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger condemned terrorism and urged both dialogue to build understanding and action to address cultural, moral, economic, and political roots of terror. The annual conference is part of the Sant'Egidio Community's effort to continue the dialogue launched at the Pope's 1986 World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi and promote a "spirit" of inter-religious dialogue that John Paul II has worked hard to advance during his pontificate. The Community, with 40,000 members from 60 countries, is active worldwide in conflict resolution, HIV/AIDS treatment, and inter-religious dialogue, and mediated the 1991 Mozambique peace accord.

3. (U) This year's conference, taking place in the days after the Beslan tragedy, began with drama when the Orthodox Russian Bishop of Beslan, Eparch Feofan Ashurkov, who had been in Beslan during the hostage taking, described his profound sadness at seeing children's bodies in the wreckage. Asserting that "only devils masquerading as men could carry out such deeds," the Eparch said the challenge now was to stop this tragedy from breeding more of the same. Society, he said, needed to "save people from uncontrolled rage." Anthony Lobos, the Catholic Bishop of Islamabad, caught the mood of the conference when he asserted: "we cannot have this conference in a vacuum, intellectually separate from the terrorist acts we are here to combat."

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Pope Recalls September 11; Calls for Firmness  
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4. (U) With the conference occurring on the eve of the third anniversary of September 11, the Pope in his message to participants specifically recalled "that terrible September 11th, 2001 when death reached the very heart of the United States." Noting that in the three years since,

threats and destruction from terrorism had increased, he concluded that "the fight against the death-makers doubtless requires firmness and resoluteness." He also urged that every effort be made to eradicate the "misery, the despair, the emptiness of heart" that has led to this drift toward terror. In an implicit reference to his opposition to the war in Iraq, the Pope also observed that

"war throws open the doors to the abyss of evil . . . [which] is why war should always be considered a defeat." The Pope also emphasized that religions have a critical role to play in reminding people the world over that peace is always possible and showing people the way to "eradicate the seeds of bitterness and misunderstanding embedded in culture and life." He rejected the attitude that a clash of civilizations or religions is inevitable, and instead called for religions to emphasize the "extreme dignity of every man and woman."

15. (U) The Pope's point man for inter-religious dialogue, Cardinal Walter Kasper, elaborated the Holy See's thoughts on the role of believers in disarming terror. Kasper called for a religious response on three levels: 1) Recognition that all religions share texts that prohibit violence, terrorism, and suicide. In this regard, Kasper pointed out that according to Koranic principles, suicide attackers should not be venerated as martyrs, but condemned as criminals; 2) Efforts to make clear to believers of all faiths that terrorism is a negation of the dignity of man and an offense to God, and that efforts to justify terror in the name of God are grave abuses that amount to profanation; 3) Support for legitimate actions to defeat terrorism.

16. (U) In explaining this last point, Kasper provided one of the most detailed public descriptions to date of Vatican thinking on how to combat terrorism. Because terrorism today has become a threat to all humanity, he argued, "we cannot defend the dignity of mankind and the peace only with pious words; we have to defend them also with actions." Specifically, he maintained that the fight against terror required military and policy interventions. "Democracies must be prepared -- even if it could mean the loss of human life -- to defend liberty with force." At the same time, he cautioned that democracies cannot employ the same methods they condemn in terrorists. This means, he explained, that we cannot employ torture, cannot launch preventive wars that abolish the rules of just war, and cannot use targeted assassinations without a fair process that precedes them. "The barbarism of terrorism," he cautioned, "cannot make us turn backward in respect to the advances of the civilized world and respond with barbarism." Kasper also called for actions that address the conditions that favor the expansion of terror, whether social, economic, or political. Finally, he called on religions to use all of their spiritual resources to resist terror by clearly and publicly distancing themselves from terror, and unmasking the religions faade of terrorists.

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Iraq: U.S. in the Crosshairs  
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17. (U) The session on Iraq predictably generated sharp criticism of the U.S. Although most panelists agreed that Iraqis were glad to be rid of Saddam Hussein and welcomed the opportunity to pursue democracy, they also maintained that Iraqis are growing more suspicious of the U.S.-led coalition and frustrated by the lack of security. Auxiliary Bishop of Baghdad Shlemon Warduni said the continued fighting, lack of essential services, and heavy-handed behavior of the coalition forces have fueled the impression that U.S. oil interests -- not concern for the Iraqi people -- had been behind the invasion. To applause from the largely European audience he said: "take the black gold, we don't want it, we want peace, we want a future for our children." Muhammad Bashar Sharif, spokesperson of the Sunni Iraqi Council of Ulema, similarly expressed anger at the U.S. government for describing Iraq as a "crusade," and concluded, "this is a dirty war," which he said was "polluted by U.S. unilateralism, exaggeration of a WMD threat, and oil interests." These statements were echoed later in a conversation with an Irish Nobel Laureate, who told PolOff, "of course we all know the war was about oil."

18. (U) Shortcomings of the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq formed a consistent theme, with speakers criticizing the lack of security and a perceived denial of freedom of speech and press. Bishop Warduni focused on human rights, suggesting that the U.S. was denying Iraqis their "human right to safety and security." Ahmad Al Tayyib, rector of Al-Azhar University in Egypt, accused U.S. forces of repressing legitimate Iraqi dissent, and "using the tactics of terrorists." When an audience member suggested that under Saddam the panelists would not have been allowed to

speak at an inter-religious conference in Milan, he was cut short by Vatican Cardinal Moussa Daoud, Prefect of the Vatican Congregation Eastern Churches. While refraining from mentioning the U.S. by name, UAE presidential advisor Ibrahim Ezzedine evoked another round of applause when he asserted that: "we all know that the occupation is responsible" for the uprising and violence. Beyond their complaints about the U.S., panelists had few suggestions or solutions for ending the violence in Iraq.

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HIV/AIDS  
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19. (U) Against the difficulties in Iraq, the panel on HIV/AIDS helped focus attention on the good news of U.S. efforts to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Ambassador Nicholson discussed HIV/AIDS as a moral, political and economic challenge, emphasizing that "HIV/AIDS and other health threats such as tuberculosis and malaria are damaging social cohesion and economic strength, blocking the very development goals the countries and concerned members of the international community are seeking to promote." The Ambassador continued by placing the administration's efforts to fight AIDS in the context of broader U.S. humanitarian efforts to prevent hunger, combat poverty, and promote development. Dr. Mark Dybul, Chief Medical Officer in the Office of the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, said that by pledging \$15 billion over five years, "no leader or country has shown such extraordinary leadership and action in the global fight against HIV/AIDS as President Bush and the American people."

10. (U) Both the Ambassador and Dybul promoted U.S. humanitarian aid partnerships with faith-based organizations. As Dybul observed, "the Emergency Plan cannot succeed in treatment, prevention and care, and in building local capacity without the faith community." This linkage tied in with Concepcion Valls' discussion of Sant'Egidio's DREAM HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment program in Mozambique. The project, which is indirectly receiving some U.S. funding and is seeking more, has provided medical care to 5,000 HIV-positive patients, and counseling and AIDS tests to 11,000 more. On September 10 Sant'Egidio's DREAM program was awarded the USD 1.6 million Balzan prize, which will likely fund the full extension of the program to Malawi and initial stages of expansion to Nigeria and Tanzania.

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Boosting Relations with Orthodox  
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11. (SBU) One of the central fronts of inter-religions dialogues for the Holy See and Sant'Egidio has been Catholic relations with the Orthodox world. With an extensive Orthodox and Vatican presence, much of the dialogue took place on the margins of the conference. Cardinal Kasper, who recently returned from a trip to Moscow to return the Kazan icon (ref b), told the Ambassador that he had been very pleased with the atmosphere of his visit. He said he was surprised to be greeted by a smiling Russian Patriarch Alexei, who embraced him as a brother. Kasper stated that their traditionally difficult personal relationship was improving, as was the broader Catholic-Orthodox relationship. He believed that "the Orthodox are isolated and need [the Vatican] to reach Europe." Significantly, Kasper told the Ambassador that the religious freedom situation for Christians in Russia was improving: Catholic priests are getting visas, and in August a second Catholic diocese, Suratov, was given full legal status by the Russian government.

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A U.N. for Religions in Jerusalem?  
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12. (U) One of the more intriguing ideas to emerge from the conference was a proposal from Israel's Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger for the establishment of a "United Nations of Religions" -- a permanent assembly of religious leaders where representatives of world religions could meet and make common agreed statements on international developments. Rabbi Metzger suggested that such an institution could help demonstrate the common values shared by different faiths -- particularly the sacredness of every human life -- and overcome growing perceptions of religious

division. Sant'Egidio's Claudio Betti commented to DCM that the proposal was doubly significant as it represented one of the first statements he could recall of a senior Jewish leader discussing the possibility of Jerusalem serving as host to "many religions."

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Signs of Thaw in Israel-Palestinian Dialogue  
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13. (SBU) One of the Conference sessions that has traditionally generated the most heated exchanges has been that between Israeli and Palestinian representatives. "What New Hope for an Old Conflict," the title of this year's session, suggested that the parties are recognizing that they need to rebuild the peace process. Abed Alloun represented the Palestinian Authority, while Ehud Yaari, an Israeli television commentator, and Abraham Friedman of the Herzliya Center represented Israeli points of view. Sant'Egidio's Betti said it was the most productive exchange he had seen in recent years between the two groups. "They didn't fight, and the participants didn't get emotional," he noted, adding that both sides recognized that the path of the past few years had led nowhere, and that the time had come to rethink the way forward.

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Comment  
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14. (SBU) Sant'Egidio's success in attracting increasing numbers of religious and political leaders reflects a growing recognition of the potentially critical role that religious leaders can play in defusing sentiments of religious conflicts that contribute to terrorism and international and internal conflicts worldwide. What was new this year, in the face of the Beslan massacre and continued attacks and kidnappings in Iraq, was the clear recognition on the part of religious leaders such as Cardinal Kasper that "pious words" were no longer enough to meet this threat, and that religious leaders needed to move to the forefront to unmask terrorists who try to hide behind a religious faade. Sant'Egidio is clearly in the forefront of groups working to promote dialogue with the Muslim world, but they have nevertheless been criticized both for attracting only moderates to dialogue and for engaging Muslim leaders who have made statements tolerating terror. While acknowledging the continuing difficulty in attracting more hard-line Muslims to participate in dialogue, Betti defended the outreach to more radical elements. "These are the people we need to reach. Unless someone in the West reaches out to them with a voice of sanity, they will continue to voice this craziness," he warned. Just as St. Francis talked to the wolf, he said, the West needs to talk to the radical voices.

NICHOLSON

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